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# Embracing the Opposition: Normative Culture and Candid Communication at the Buffalo Mountain School

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# Embracing the Opposition:

Normative Culture and Candid Communication  
at the Buffalo Mountain School

Christian McCrory

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in  
Teaching degree at the School for International Training Graduate Institute in  
Brattleboro, Vermont.

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AYMAT Thesis Advisor: Pat Moran

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**Educational Resources Information Center Descriptors**

Teacher Attitudes

Teacher Behavior

Teacher Improvement

Teacher Responsibility

Teacher Role

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between two approaches to disruptive behavior used at the Buffalo Mountain School, where the author works as a Special Education Provider for behaviorally and developmentally challenged students. These are the Normative Approach, established by the Northeastern Family Institute, and the Candid Approach, which is defined by the author based on his observations of practitioners at Buffalo Mountain. Each of these are used in an alternative school setting to redirect anti-social or disruptive behavior. The purpose of this paper is to determine the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches along with the parameters of their efficacy. It will also examine their relationship to each other with the intention of establishing a complementary synthesis of the two. It will show that the Normative Approach is broadly effective, but that when a disruptive student is not invested in the normative culture of a community, the Candid Approach is required to reach the individual on a more psychologically fundamental level. This document will be of particular interest to educators working at an alternative school, but will also be of relevance to any educators with disruptive or anti-social students in their classroom.

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## Introduction

When confronted with disruptive and oppositional behavior in the classroom, it can be challenging for educators to respond in an effective way. Some educators will inadvertently engage in a power struggle with the disruptive student, insisting that the student respect them and their authority, and demanding that the behavior in question immediately cease. Yet if the student does not comply, not only can the educator begin to lose all semblance of authority in the classroom, but a combative dynamic can arise between them, one in which there will be one winner and one loser. The presence of an audience—the other students—further compounds the unfortunate dilemma, as the stakes become commensurately higher for both parties; neither the educator nor the oppositional student want to “lose face” in front of the class. A contest of wills arises, with neither party being willing to back down.

This is a common scenario with an unfavorable outcome. On the one hand, it leads to educators feeling undermined and embattled in their own classrooms, thereby increasing the likelihood of their taking a defensive or even antagonistic approach towards their students. On the other hand, it strengthens the position of oppositional students and can encourage such behavior in similarly disposed classmates. The oppositional student learns that he has more power than authority figures have led him to believe; the words “need to” and “have to” carry no necessity whatsoever, and his opposition grants him a considerable degree of control over the classroom. Peers observe the student's power, and some will respect him for it. Thus the situation quickly deteriorates. Feeling frustrated and threatened, the educator becomes more short-tempered and authoritarian, and the otherwise non-oppositional students rapidly begin to feel oppressed by her efforts to maintain control. Disruptive behavior increases, the educator

becomes involved in multiple power struggles, and the classroom can spiral out of control.

Yet all of this can be avoided. Instead of engaging in a one-on-one power struggle, the educator can utilize the classroom's "peer power" to influence the oppositional student. Rather than declare what she expects from the student and what he "needs" to do, she could ask his peer group what they expect of him in the classroom. Or instead of silently speculating on the student's underlying issues, the educator can publicly seek out the rationale behind the student's choices in an attempt to bring the student's motives for being oppositional into light. And should all of these methods fail to work, an educator does not have to coerce or force the student into submission; she can acknowledge that only the student himself has the power to make good choices.

These methods of addressing oppositional behavior in the classroom exemplify the two approaches that are the focus of this paper: Normative Culture and Candid Communication. The first of these, Normative Culture, is the fruition of the Normative Approach framework developed by the Northeastern Family Institute ("Normative Communities," 2008). When addressing anti-social behavior, the Normative Approach relies primarily upon the expectations and feedback of a community as opposed to the expectations and feedback of an authority figure.

Candid Communication is a term coined by the author during his employment at the Buffalo Mountain School to describe the style of discourse used by certain staff members there. It is an approach towards anti-social behavior that uses genuine and direct statements of appraisal and observation in concert with a comprehensive emotional awareness in order to bring attention to topics of behavioral concern. It is grounded in the therapeutic strategies

This paper will examine the dynamic between these two approaches, in both their complementary and conflicting aspects, in the hope of distilling a practical synthesis that draws



upon the strengths of each. This examination will be of benefit to educators, classroom counselors, and behavioral interventionists who regularly work with emotionally volatile or oppositional students. Given the increasing numbers of these students, there is a large and growing need for professionals capable of efficiently managing extreme or disruptive behavior (Johnson, 1998; Petersilia & Wilson, 2011). This paper offers such professionals an outline of strategies that have been successful at the Buffalo Mountain School.

I became interested in this topic when I observed that the staff who had the most success with emotionally escalated students at the Buffalo Mountain School seemed to communicate in a similar way. I began trying to emulate this approach, which I later identified as Candid Communication, but found that I needed a greater understanding of it in order to practice it effectively. Further, I observed that it was not always in harmony with the school's Normative Approach, which made me curious as to how the approaches could be practiced in concert with one another. To explore these topics in greater detail, I made notes of classroom interactions, discussed classroom dynamics with my colleagues, read about various approaches to oppositional behavior, and recorded interviews with two program directors, two therapists, and one educator. A selection of these interviews is included in the appendix.

In this paper, I will begin with an introduction to the organization that established the Normative Approach, followed by a synopsis of my position within this organization. I will identify the origins and fundamental aspects of the Normative Approach and explain how the approach is practiced at the Buffalo Mountain School. I will then describe Candid Communication in both theory and practice, and will examine its strengths and weaknesses relative to the Normative Approach. I will argue that these approaches are complementary despite their differences, as Candid Communication is able to reach students that are not socially

invested enough in their community to be significantly influenced by the Normative Approach.

### **A History of NFI and the Buffalo Mountain School**

The Northeastern Family Institute of Vermont (NFI) is part of a larger, umbrella organization known as the North American Family Institute (“History,” 2008). Founded in Malden, Massachusetts in 1974 by Dr. Yitzhak Bakal, NAFI began as an Outreach and Tracking program for delinquent youth that had been remanded to juvenile detention centers. The program met with immediate success and soon expanded to other locations in Massachusetts. To date, NAFI organizations exist in nine states and have expanded into behavioral health services, child welfare, juvenile justice, and education. Youth Link programs, which foster a sense of community between police officers and urban youth, are decreasing violence in inner city neighborhoods across the northeast (“History,” 2008).

NFI Vermont emerged in 1984 when NAFI secured a contract with the Vermont Department of Mental Health. Beginning with a program that provided therapeutic homes for children that had been institutionalized at the Vermont State Hospital, NFI Vermont has now expanded into thirteen programs in total, ranging from therapeutic group homes and specialized foster homes to alternative schools for children with behavioral issues (*Normative Approach*, n.d.).

In contrast to the prison-like facilities they had come from, the first clients in the NAFI program discovered that no doors in NAFI buildings were locked; the clients were expected to make good choices of their own volition. Additionally, they were encouraged to help formulate the program's social expectations during group therapy sessions, thus giving them a sense of influence and belonging—they felt that they were part of a community. These approaches

marked the inception of the Normative Approach and informed the development of NFI's community-based philosophy ("History," 2008).

In 2005, responding to a need for a day treatment program in Vermont's Lamoille, Orleans, and Caledonia counties, NFI established the Buffalo Mountain School in Hardwick. Like all of NFI's programs, the school was rooted in NFI policies and the Normative Approach, but was also allowed to develop its own methodology and mission statement. The resulting program was unique among NFI's schools in that it employed therapists as full-time staff members. In fact, for most of its history, the Buffalo Mountain School has employed three therapists, at least one of whom was present for 95% of the school week. These therapists would provide daily feedback to educators and classroom counselors about the status of students, as well as sharing their insights about the social dynamics within the program, whether between students and staff or exclusively between staff members.

Based on my discussions with staff members, I have come to believe that this immersion of the therapeutic component has been instrumental in shaping the culture of the Buffalo Mountain School. Educators in most schools usually aim to silence disruptive behavior rather than confront it head on, but this is not the case at the Buffalo Mountain School. Even though a student may be disrupting a lesson with their behavior, the educators will often choose to directly confront the social, emotional, or psychological dynamics that lead to that behavior rather than send the student out of the classroom so that the lesson can continue uninterrupted. In such circumstances, the student's behavior can be a springboard for a new lesson, one that addresses social or emotional competencies that are relevant to the entire class. In this respect, the therapeutic component of the program is closely integrated with its academic endeavors. Further, these therapeutic strategies are the very basis of Candid Communication.

The Buffalo Mountain School staff that I spoke with also asserted that one particular therapist, Jody Howe, was largely responsible for this high level of therapeutic integration, as he has been involved with the program since its very inception. Additionally, I have noticed that Jody seems to most consistently and often most effectively practice the Candid Approach; indeed, I would argue that the Candid Approach is nearly indistinguishable from his therapeutic strategies. Thus I believe that a large part of what I have defined as Candid Communication at the Buffalo Mountain School can be attributed to Jody's therapeutic practice, which, it seems to me, is essentially an aspect of his personality. That being said, I have no doubt that diverse personalities can practice Candid Communication as an approach; one does not have to be Jody Howe in order to communicate candidly. Jody has, however, contributed greatly to my understanding of this approach by providing an outstanding example of a candid practitioner.

### **Current Position and Personal Interest**

At the time this paper is being written, I am employed as a Special Education Provider at the Buffalo Mountain School. I provide academic instruction for a small group of students of mixed ages and abilities, but my primary role is to address anti-social behavior when it occurs. If a student becomes verbally or physically abusive they are asked to leave the classroom or group activity. Once a student has been separated from their community, I or my colleagues must “process” with them before they can rejoin their peers. This entails engaging the student in a discussion about what their behavior was, how it affected their community, and how they're going to address it. In these capacities, I am constantly utilizing both Candid Communication and the Normative Approach as I attempt to manage the classroom and the fragile emotional nature of behaviorally challenged students. And while I have repeatedly witnessed the effectiveness of

each of these approaches, I have also witnessed emotionally escalated students become violent and destructive despite my best efforts. This has inspired in me an ardent curiosity as to why these approaches are sometimes successful and sometimes not.

## Research Questions

In analyzing the relationship between Normative Culture and Candid Communication, the following questions arise based upon my preliminary experience:

- ⤴ Candid Communication can be emotionally provocative, occasionally leading to outbursts and extreme behavior from students. Indeed, Jody Howe, a therapist who relies heavily on Candid Communication in his interactions with the students, once referred to his methodology as “existential therapy.” This raises the question: What role does students' sense of emotional safety play in determining the effectiveness of Candid Communication?
- ⤴ The Normative Approach has proven to be successful at addressing anti-social behaviors through indirect cues and the utilization of peer power. A community with well established, pro-social norms encourages a stable baseline of behavior that inhibits derogatory and antagonistic interactions. Students are usually motivated by a desire for acceptance in their community, and if their peers are operating in accordance with the Normative Culture of their school, otherwise disruptive students are likely to follow that lead. Thus the normative power of this approach results, ideally, in behavioral reformation through community values. In this socially

challenging context, what role do normative pressures have in determining students' feelings of emotional safety?

- ⤴ Finally, it has been my experience that both Normative Culture, a product of NFI's philosophy, and Candid Communication, a way of interacting in practice amongst the staff of the Buffalo Mountain School, can each fail to address the needs of escalated students when practiced individually. Nevertheless, the Buffalo Mountain School has earned a reputation within the community for helping students overcome their anti-social tendencies. This raises the possibility that the combination of these approaches is more successful than each approach is individually. What factors must be present for these approaches to be effective in their respective roles?

These questions have informed my research of these approaches. My primary research question is: How can the two approaches be effective in addressing disruptive or anti-social behavior in students at Buffalo Mountain School? To answer this question, I identified the theories and practices of each, placed them in the historical context of the school, drew on first-hand experiences and observations, and interviewed staff practitioners at the school. I then examined the interplay between these two approaches and determined how they function together.

### **What is Normative Culture?**

This chapter will begin by describing the origins of normative culture. It will explain how contemporary usage of this term in the fields of education and psychotherapy has departed from these origins. It will then describe how norms are established and maintained, both in the classroom or therapy group and in cultures at large. This will be followed by a summary of NFI's official documentation of the Normative Approach, as well how the approach has been carried out at the Buffalo Mountain School specifically. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of viewpoints from practitioners of the Normative Approach, from which conclusions will be drawn about its various strengths and weaknesses.

Normative culture is the body of implicit expectations under which a group of people operate. It puts pressure on individuals to modify their behavior in such a way as to conform to the standards of a group. A normative culture arises organically and spontaneously in any group or organization, and most of the time the pressure to conform to its norms is subtle and the norms themselves are merely implied. However, a normative culture can also be purposefully constructed to meet specific goals, and in these cases the norms are explicitly stated.

Normative culture has its roots in anthropology, archaeology, and history, but the concept has since been used for the purposes of other disciplines (Johnson, 1999). These include sociology, in which the concept of norms is used to understand human behavior in a general sense, and group psychotherapy, where its role is very similar to the approaches used in education and in NFI's programs (Gibbs, 1965; Yalom, 1995). While the definition of a "norm" per se does not differ appreciably from discipline to discipline, the way in which norms are seen as relating to culture and the way in which they are shaped does exhibit variation.

In anthropology, archaeology, and history, the “normative model of culture” is a model that defines culture as being a collection of shared norms of behavior (Johnson, 1999). In these fields, the term is used specifically to clarify the meaning of culture, as norms are understood to be a function of the definition of a culture. This type of norm can be seen operating and evolving throughout an entire population and is used to frame the cultural variations between groups within that population (Boyd & Richerson, 1994). An example of a normative culture viewed through an anthropological lens would be the observation that chewing gum, a common and innocuous habit here in the United States, is stigmatized and forbidden in Singapore. By this understanding, the “no-gum-chewing” norm defines, in part, the culture of Singapore.

Yet certain distinctions separate the “normative model of culture” from “normative culture” as it is used in education and psychotherapy. In the latter, norms are seen as an active force, as they serve an influential function rather than a purely descriptive one. Norms define the culture, but they are also used to shape it (Boyd & Richerson, 1994). Indeed, in many cases, and certainly in NFI's programs, normative culture is used very much like a tool for establishing the *desired* social environment of a classroom or therapy group. While the norms of a culture influence its members as a matter of course, using the normative model as an approach entails explicitly formulating those norms to meet specific educational or therapeutic goals. In this type of normative setting, we see small groups of people (theoretically as few as two) operating in accordance with highly specialized and contextualized norms. Thus we can speak of the “culture” of a classroom, or the “culture” of psychotherapy groups, because these small groups are temporarily operating in accordance with a shared set of norms. An example of a normative culture viewed through an educational lens would be a group of public school students who understand that while they are in Mr. X's classroom they are not to chew gum. Once they are



outside the classroom, however, the norm no longer applies because it is specific to a certain setting.

In education and group psychotherapy, purposefully constructed normative cultures are employed to facilitate an atmosphere conducive to learning and/or catharsis (MacKenzie, 1990). As many of the individuals in alternative education or therapeutic groups come from chaotic and anti-social backgrounds, it is imperative that they do not inadvertently establish a social atmosphere of this kind in their schools or therapy groups. Students are less able to learn when they feel unsafe or unwanted, and chaotic social environments tend to foster unpleasant, antagonistic interactions which can further traumatize struggling students (Holley & Steiner, 2005). A carefully constructed normative culture can discourage the antagonistic elements in the relationship between students, and can thereby greatly improve the educational and/or therapeutic nature of the social environment (*Normative Approach*, n.d.). Further, an exemplary culture of respectful communication and acceptance can make the students and/or clients aware that alternatives to the anti-social environments of their backgrounds do exist, and that they themselves have the power to influence the culture around them by stating their needs appropriately. This realization sometimes leads to pro-social behavior that continues outside the classroom or therapy group as students attempt to re-order their own lives.

### **How Norms Are Established and Maintained**

An additional variation across disciplines is in the question of who sets the norms and how those norms are set. In anthropology, norms are understood to have arisen organically over an enormous period of time, perhaps even thousands of years (Boyd & Richerson, 1994). These norms are sometimes simply a product of human caprice, but they usually develop as a response

to the environment in which a culture is located (Boyd & Richerson, 1994). This is in contrast to educational or therapeutic settings, where norms are usually explicitly discussed and agreed upon by a group. While there may still be spontaneously formed norms in these settings, many of the norms, and often those of greatest consequence, are consciously shaped to facilitate specific goals. These are either collaboratively established or authoritatively established, but they must serve the purpose of the school or therapeutic model.

In group psychotherapy, a field in which norms function in a very similar way as to those in alternative educational settings, it is acknowledged that both group members and the group's leader shape the norms of the group, but it is also believed that the leader of the group necessarily influences the norms as a matter of course. This is said to be unavoidable, as the group leader will implicitly influence the group dynamic through his or her own behavior (Yalom, 1995). Thus even if the group leader desires to have norms be collaboratively established, they cannot help but establish some norms authoritatively. With this in mind, many educators and psychotherapists will make these norms explicit. This, according to Irvin Yalom (1995), can be done in two ways: "first, by backing it with the weight of authority and experience and, second, by presenting the rationale behind the suggested mode of procedure in order to enlist the support of the patients" (113). The Normative Approach relies exclusively upon the latter.

Yet it is often the case that norms do not have to be explicitly laid out. As Yalom (1995) observes in psychotherapy groups, norms are strikingly resistant to change despite the flux of group members. This is certainly true at the Buffalo Mountain School, where new students rapidly pick up on the norms of the program without being told. They see how the older students respond to staff cues and conduct themselves accordingly. And while this automatic normative

conditioning is usually to the advantage of the program, it simultaneously presents us with a danger as well: if the norms of the program are not being followed, either by the older students or by the staff, the newcomers may adopt the belief that the observed behavior, even if verbally censured afterwards, can still be followed. They may feel that they can “get away with it,” since they have seen others behave that way in the past without significant consequence. Thus staff must always be careful to ensure that established norms are closely observed in the critical weeks following a new student's arrival.

Once they are established, maintaining the norms of the Buffalo Mountain School requires consistent verbal cues that draw upon the language of our specific program. This language is grounded in the Points Process, a behavior assessment strategy based on student feedback, which will be expounded upon shortly.

### **Official Documentation of the Normative Approach**

The Normative Approach, as outlined in NFI's *Normative Approach & Crisis Prevention Training Manual* (n.d.), rests on three basic principles:

1. The group or community is unified by a common purpose.
2. Each member of that group or community has a role in determining norms.
3. Norms are purposefully shaped to encourage and reinforce acceptable behavior.

These principles serve as the foundation for programs that utilize the Normative Approach. They rest upon the presupposition that “all human beings desire a sense of belonging and social relatedness” (*Normative Approach*, n.d.). If each member of a community is driven by their devotion to a common purpose and feels that their viewpoint on how to achieve that purpose is valued and acknowledged, then they are much more likely to conform to community norms that

reinforce acceptable behavior. As mentioned above, this learning process often leads to long term change and inclusion in the greater community. This approach differs greatly from the more common authoritative model, where extrinsically established rules are enforced by an authority figure. In the authoritative model, the students and patients have not “bought in” to the expectations governing behavior in the program, and thus they are far more likely to be defiant when those expectations are in opposition to their desires.

NFI also asserts that its Normative model is a “value-based” approach, as it draws upon the individual values of community members to establish its goals and expectations. Based upon these collectively determined values, community members will be held accountable for both their positive and negative actions. This is because “to form and maintain connections, people must engage in mutually acceptable patterns of behavior” (*Normative Approach*, n.d.). Thus the Normative Approach encourages individuals to discuss whether or not their actions are consistent with these goals and values in a pro-social, community-based environment.

### **Normative Culture at the Buffalo Mountain School**

The Normative Culture of the Buffalo Mountain School is explicitly presented in the Points Process. This a process in which students earn points based on their behaviors, on a scale of 0 - 3. High points (such as a 3) grant the student certain privileges, while excessively low points (such as a 0, which is referred to as an MO–missed opportunity) can prevent a student from participating in school events or community excursions. Yet it is the students themselves that determine how many points they have earned by agreeing as a community upon a number. Twice a day, students assemble with their teachers and classroom counselor and discuss how well they feel they have done in nine categories of behavioral assessment. The student states the

points that he or she feels they have earned for the day, and each of their peers must then either support that assessment or voice their disagreement. In this way, each student is given the opportunity to express their opinion and is thereby influential in establishing a consensus on behavioral norms. Students learn how their behavior has affected others, and they are held accountable for their own actions.

The first seven categories of the Points Process are Cooperation, Effectively Managing Moods and Emotions, Appropriate Communication, Respectful Boundaries, Support to the Community, Community Behaviors, and Academic Effort. Most of these are self-explanatory, although it is worth stating that Community Behaviors is an assessment of the student's behavior outside of school. In addition to these, students and staff collaboratively formulate two unique behavioral goals based upon an individual student's presenting issues. For example, a power-seeking student who tends to boss his or her peers around might have the goal, "I will resist the urge to exercise control." Or the goal for a class clown might be, "I will name two times I distracted myself or others." This allows the Points Process to address individual behavioral issues that would not otherwise be covered by the standard behavioral norms, but which are nevertheless anti-social or disruptive in nature.

In addition to providing students with an opportunity to assess their own behavioral progress, the Points Process also helps develop a language around behavioral cues that can be used throughout the day. This language is used in staff to peer interactions, peer to peer interactions, and even occasionally in peer to staff interactions. The common understanding around what the behavioral expectations are for each category in the Points Process allows for a kind of verbal shorthand that immediately brings this understanding to mind. For example, if a student seizes another student's arm in excitement, a staff member may simply say,

“Boundaries,” to remind that student of the community expectation that students will not touch others without consent. This makes the staff’s role in managing behaviors more convenient, but it also provides the students with a culturally-based vocabulary that can be used to hold their peers accountable for their actions without the danger of sounding hostile. One might hear a child as young as six say to a peer, “John, I’m going to hold you accountable for communication.” John is used to hearing this from his community, and so the emphasis ideally shifts from the person cueing him to the cue itself. The Points Process thus fosters a normative language of support as well as a normative atmosphere in which students are both reflecting on their own behavior and maintaining an awareness of the behavior of others.

The essence of the normative approach rests upon students supporting each other to follow the norms of the program. Indeed, I would argue that this is an effective benchmark for measuring the success of a normatively-based program: are the students socially invested enough in the culture of the program to encourage deviant members to modify their behaviors? This can often be seen at the Buffalo Mountain School, where positively-oriented students use the language of the program to try (with irregular success) to redirect their negative peers. The presence of such a dynamic suggests that a strong normative culture exists at Buffalo Mountain, and it can be wonderful to see students encouraging their peers to be appropriate.

However, when a student's emotional or psychological background prohibits their healthy involvement in a community, the normative approach hits a wall. If students do not feel invested in or accepted by a community, if they do not share the same values as those around them, or if their mission is counter to that of a program or a society, then no norm on earth can influence them to conform to a collective will. These individuals, if left untreated, can become socially isolated, emotionally volatile, and even physically abusive. It is at this point that an approach that

does not rely on cultural or socially-based dynamics is required.

### **Viewpoints from Practitioners**

The practitioners I interviewed agreed that the Normative Approach can be effective at facilitating the development of social skills when there is a positive peer culture (M. Schaefer, personal communication, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). This is due to the fact that community expectations are made very clear; students know how they need to behave in order to be successful. When students are not following the norms of the community, their peers are quick to point this out to them, as the Normative Approach encourages student-to-student cues over staff-to-student cues (J. Howe, personal communication, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012). This further encourages the development of pro-social behavior, as students learn how to express dissent or disapproval amongst themselves (Schaefer, 2012).

One practitioner, Jody Howe, put particular emphasis on the value of the Normative Approach being a “safe-container” and an “impersonal structured framework” (Howe, 2012). By this he meant that students are able to start over each day in a predictable social environment, one that is not going to change in response to a student's personal choices. While they may have offended their peers or have done something that they're embarrassed about, those students will still be a part of their community the following day—and that community will continue to maintain consistent expectations of them. This aspect of the approach makes many students feel safer because they know they will not be “thrown away” for their behavior; their community will continue to work with them to cultivate pro-social behavior (Howe, 2012). In such an environment, students feel as though they can make mistakes and still be accepted.

Two of the practitioners interviewed also observed that a healthy Normative Culture is

self-regulating, as “peer pressure lessens occurrences of student-adult power struggles” (Howe, 2012). When peers hold each other accountable for anti-social behavior, the need for intervention by an authority figure is de-emphasized. And in truly ideal Normative Cultures, the positive behavior of some students elicits positive behavior from others without any kind of formalized or explicit direction; the community self-regulates as a matter of course (R. Geisel, personal communication, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). Ideally, students see the success of positively oriented students and seek to emulate those behaviors without deliberate intervention.

However, this aspect of the Normative Approach also presents us with one of its challenges: the culture must be positive in order to elicit positive behavior in the fashion described above. The practitioner who seemed to hold the Normative Approach in the highest regard, Rick Geisel (2012), stated that it's hard to “build a healthy and supportive critical mass of positive normative culture students,” particularly given the constant flux of students within a program. Without this positive “critical mass,” the power of peer pressure will only serve to reinforce the negative, anti-social behavior that dominates the culture. This sentiment was echoed by Jody Howe (2012), who observed that “when the peer culture gets negatively-oriented, then the normative process really becomes a talking point. It regresses to, what if it were positive?”

When the peer culture does become overly negative, staff members tend to intervene and attempt to re-establish pro-social norms. The fact that we do so, Jody Howe (2012) argues, suggests that it is not truly a Normative Culture because “its baseline is set by authority figures.” While students can and do modify certain norms to fit their collective will, those norms tend to be minor: can we chew gum in class, can we wear hats, are tank-tops appropriate, etc. Yet the core norms of the culture are inevitably determined by staff; students will never be allowed to



smoke in school, or come and go from class as they please. According to Jody, students are often aware of this dichotomy and feel resentful of it. They feel that staff build them up as free agents in their community, but that ultimately it is the staff that calls the shots; students have limited cultural influence.

An additional challenge lies in those students who are not invested in the community, “passive resistors” as Rick Geisel (2012) calls them, who serve to undermine the normative process. These students are not concerned with meeting community expectations, and their passivity or negativity tends to lead other students astray. The Normative Approach appears to have no impact on these individuals, as they are “not concerned with the perceptions of their community, [are] not concerned with their place in their community” (Schaefer, 2012). These may simply be students who are “too cool for school,” so to speak, and express their lack of investment through non-participation and a casual disregard for norms, or they may be truly anti-social students who deliberately and conspicuously violate community norms. Either way, the community is highly unlikely to be able to influence such students through the normative process alone.

Conversely, when a student has consistently pushed his or her community away through anti-social behavior, the community can also cease to be invested in the success of such a student. Mike Schaefer (2012) reports that he has “seen instances before where a student has ostracized his community so far, so much, that they are no longer willing to participate with that person.” This presents a serious challenge to the Normative Approach, as one of its key assets is its capacity to provide the “safe container” that Jody Howe spoke of above. If its possible for a student to so alienate his or her community that the community will not engage in the normative process with them, clearly another approach will be required to make any further progress.

A final challenge that was identified by Mike Schaefer (2012) is that the public and collective nature of the normative process is not always ideal. For one, public forums can simply be overwhelming for some students, as “a lot of people feel very stifled when having to speak in front of a community, or having to address their individual needs in front of a community.” Many of the issues that incline students towards anti-social behavior are trauma-based and can be hard to address as a community, as students are understandably disinclined to speak openly about their needs in a public forum. For this reason, the community-based power of the Normative Approach can fail to reach some students in certain circumstances.

### **What is Candid Communication?**

This chapter will begin by describing the conceptual background behind Candid Communication. It will ground the approach by describing how it is used in an educational environment, and will give real world examples for further clarification. It will then explain the various kinds of candid statements one can make when using this approach, as well as detailing the appropriate circumstances of their use. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of viewpoints from practitioners of Candid Communication, from which conclusions will be drawn about its various strengths and weaknesses.

In attempting to pin down the style of communication used at the Buffalo Mountain School, my colleagues and I have considered numerous epithets. Some were too broad, others too specific, and a few had already been utilized to describe other styles of communication. We have settled on the name “Candid Communication” because it connotes the emphasis on transparency and honest representation that lies at the heart of this style of communication. When discussing the Candid “Approach,” the author is simply referencing the abstract foundation that a practitioner draws upon to manifest the candid manner of discourse.

Rather than shy away from uncomfortable or inconvenient truths, the candid communicator seeks to plainly address issues that most people would find to be awkward or incendiary. For that reason, this approach can be somewhat emotionally provocative, but it is unrivaled at achieving the disinterment of otherwise unexamined social and psychological dynamics. Accordingly, it is a vital tool in a classroom in which disruptive or anti-social behavior is inhibiting the educational process, as it allows the educator to address the fundamental issues that cause the behavior.

Unlike Normative Culture which has a robust theoretical background in multiple disciplines, Candid Communication is an amorphous manner of discourse that has not been explicitly considered as an educational approach until now. Nevertheless, therapists and philosophers have employed this style of communication in their professional capacities for centuries. In ancient Greece, Socrates sought to reveal the biases of his fellow Athenians by candidly challenging their assumptions, despite the irritation, clearly illustrated in the *Euthyphro*, that his endeavors often evoked (Cooper, 1997). More recently, practitioners of Gestalt therapy engage in honest and open relationships with their clients, and attempt to cultivate introspective insight by eliciting an awareness of their clients' feelings and behaviors (Yontef, 1993). In these philosophical and therapeutic traditions, the pursuit of complex and potentially volatile truths compels speakers to disregard constrictive social conventions of discourse in order to elicit honest observations about the topic at hand. Similarly, if an educator finds his or herself in a classroom in which veiled dynamics are disrupting the learning environment, these dynamics will need to be exposed in order to truly address that disruption. To do so, the educator must utilize each of the three core strategies of Candid Communication: direct statements of appraisal and observation, intentional suspension of norms that inhibit clarity, and an abiding and comprehensive emotional awareness.

The first strategy of Candid Communication is to make direct statements of appraisal and observation. The candid communicator says what he or she sees, regardless of whether or not their observation is pleasant or is going to be well received. This is because the candid communicator believes that stating one's own perspective genuinely and directly leads to greater understanding, and that this understanding can ultimately lead to personal growth. The knowledge gained is worth the awkward social atmosphere, embarrassment, or hurt feelings that

may result from the statement. A story from the Buffalo Mountain School will help to illustrate this point.

A high school student had been drawing swastikas in school for several weeks. When this was addressed, the student claimed he belonged to a white supremacy group that drew heavily from the principles of Nazism. He would frequently talk about this group in school. In an attempt to educate the student about intolerance, I worked with him on a research paper that sought to outline which people were and were not accepted by the Nazis, as I knew that the student considered a mixed-race former student of our school to be his friend (a contradiction that, inexplicably, didn't trouble the student in the slightest). The student determined that the Nazis would imprison or execute groups such as the Jews, homosexuals, the disabled, and any dark-skinned peoples. As the student continued to consider other groups that would be targeted, a classroom counselor asked the student whether or not the student himself would have been persecuted by the Nazis. The student proudly proclaimed that he was not Jewish, and so of course he would be accepted by the Nazis. The classroom counselor, in a courageous exhibition of Candid Communication, responded, "What about your IQ scores? The Nazis only wanted the best and the brightest to be a part of their movement, yet your IQ scores are low enough that you are legally considered to be mentally disabled." I was stunned. I knew that the student had a foul temper and that he could easily be enraged by any perceived slight, so I fully expected a loud and dramatic retort. Yet rather than fly into a rage, the student simply looked down and was silent. After a moment, he continued working on the paper. During the last few weeks of school, the student scarcely mentioned his belief in white supremacy.

Now this scenario certainly could have turned out differently: the student could have screamed at or attacked the candid classroom counselor. Yet even if he had, the truth had been

boldly spoken and would have an impact on him regardless of the student's reaction. This student was carelessly advocating for acts of violence against minorities and the disabled; yet when he himself was shown to categorically be a target for such violence, his enthusiasm for intolerance rapidly waned. The truth may have been painful for him, but it led to personal growth. The classroom counselor's candid statement sparked a level of reflection that may not have otherwise occurred.

The second strategy of Candid Communication is to employ the intentional suspension of norms that inhibit clarity. Typically, the candid communicator suspends the norms that dictate which categories of communication are socially acceptable and which are not. It is not a common practice in our society, for example, to report one's own observations of another's emotional needs. Yet this tactic can instantaneously alter the behavior of students who are acting out in class. A class clown who, much to the chagrin of the teacher, is enjoying himself immensely by distracting his peers can rapidly become quiet and introspective if the emotional needs driving him to be disruptive are suddenly made public by his teacher. The focus of the class shifts from the student's antics to his obvious longing for acceptance, and suddenly the situation doesn't seem so funny to the student anymore. And while this is primarily the result of a sensitive or upsetting topic being raised, the sudden shift in the classroom is also a result of the shock that the students feel at having a normative social safety net torn away.

One might object that educators should never deliberately embarrass their students. I would respond that an effective candid communicator is not actively seeking to embarrass a student, but rather is attempting to bring the motivation for the student's anti-social or disruptive behavior to light; the educator is simply attempting to educate the student about his own self. If the student is embarrassed by such observations, this does not necessarily mean that the teacher

has embarrassed him per se, but rather that the behavior, when clearly delineated, is itself a source of embarrassment for the student. By this understanding, embarrassment is an acceptable and potentially transformative consequence of self-knowledge, a consequence that also commonly has the fortuitous side-effect of stopping disruptive behavior in its tracks. The student has already made his issues public by choosing to engage in disruptive or anti-social behaviors in a public space. The candid educator's role is simply to bring those issues into the realm of social discourse.

The candid communicator's disregard for norms can also have a shocking effect that serves to facilitate understanding in a manner reminiscent of Zen Buddhism. Sudden insight can result when the educator steps out of their prescribed role and surprises the student through normative nonobservance. For example, one student at the Buffalo Mountain School had the tendency to shout whenever he was excited—which was often. He seemed to be unaware that his voice was as loud as it was despite our constant reminders. One day, he yelled as he was describing an altercation with a peer. I calmly acknowledged his complaint with the other student, but then screamed as loud as I possibly could, “I THINK HE STRUGGLES TO HEAR WHAT YOU ARE SAYING BECAUSE YOU'RE SAYING IT SO LOUDLY!” The student was clearly shocked: he jumped in his seat and covered his ears, both surprised and amused by the ridiculously loud yet emotionally flat sound of my voice. He experienced first-hand the unpleasant sensation of being subjected to a completely unmoderated voice. We continued on with the lesson, and in the weeks that followed I observed that his voice seldom rose to inappropriate levels.

The last strategy of Candid Communication is to maintain an abiding and comprehensive emotional awareness. This awareness is considered to be comprehensive because candid

educators must strive to be mindful not only of the emotional states of others, but also of their own emotional state. Candid educators must be keenly aware of themselves, ensuring that they do not allow their own ego-needs to interfere with their ability to navigate the troubled waters of their students' emotional lives. If educators do become emotionally triggered by something the student has said, they will struggle to maintain an objective and therapeutic line of communication, as their own issues tend to get wrapped up in the issues of the student. For example, an educator who is triggered by a student's sexually-provocative language, becoming angry in response, will very likely approach the student's issues from an antagonistic standpoint—the standpoint of an offended victim instead of a neutral facilitator. Yet instead of acknowledging the validity of the educator's position (i.e., “You're my teacher and I shouldn't use sexually-provocative language towards you,”) the student will often only be further estranged by the angered educator's attempts to express their indignation. This is because the educator's response to the oppositional student has become oppositional in turn; he or she is now a victim of the student's behavior rather than an impartial attendant to the student's growth and understanding. In my experience, students are very unlikely to achieve any measure of insight in such circumstances, and thus the behavior will not effectively be addressed.

Yet even if the educator is able to keep his or her anger from being expressed, emotions have the power to considerably influence a line of reasoning, sometimes prompting an otherwise supportive educator to engage in a dialogue that is incendiary without being cathartic. I have fallen victim to this dynamic myself. In one situation of this kind, although I was able to stay calm and not express my anger towards a student, I found that I was making confrontational and provocative statements that did not serve the student in a beneficial way. Fortunately, I was able to recognize that my line of reasoning wasn't helping us resolve the dispute, and so I sought the



support of another staff member instead of continuing to engage the student. Yet if an educator is unaware of their compromised emotional position and the impact it is having on a student, the student is likely to feel “bullied.” Indeed, this word specifically was used recently when a student complained to our program director about the behavior of one of our staff members. It was an unfortunate occurrence for our program, as “bullying” does not exemplify the candid approach to communication; it is merely the product of an angry staff member indirectly expressing that anger towards the student.

Thus we can see how critical the comprehensive emotional awareness component of candid communication truly is. If educators lose sight of their own emotions or of the emotional responses of their student, then they risk regressing from cathartic candid practitioners attempting to enlighten their pupil to verbally antagonistic authorities using their position for mere emotional battery. This is the single greatest danger of the candid approach. Subsequently, inexperienced practitioners must take great care to stay perpetually attuned to the emotional atmosphere surrounding their dialogue with their students.

### **Candid Communication in Practice**

To successfully navigate the tangled line of dialogue that the ego's defenses manufacture requires a direct, purposive, and self-aware approach on the part of the candid educator. It takes linguistic skill and a certain measure of intelligence to keep the direction of the conversation on a therapeutic track. Like seasoned politicians, oppositional students are at times capable of remarkable obfuscation; a topic can easily be misrepresented through word choice, or avoided altogether through redirection. If the candid practitioner is not attentive, the conversation can stray far from its therapeutic purpose, which can lead to confrontational and acerbic exchanges

that strengthen the ego's defenses rather than illuminate them. Further, the candid practitioner must be concurrently vigilant of his own emotional state, ensuring that he does not become emotionally triggered by the responses he receives; he cannot allow his own biases and personal issues to color the tone and direction of the dialogue. Subsequently, practicing the candid approach effectively is challenging, and not everyone is able to do it well. The essential elements are fairly straightforward, and will be expounded upon below, but the practitioner must possess keen emotional intuition and a prudent verbal aptitude in order to practice this approach successfully.

A unique challenge for the candid communicator is the struggle to maintain emotional equilibrium while simultaneously allowing oneself to be genuine with the student. In the Normative Approach, there is a well-established language that allows one to be somewhat formulaic in one's exchanges with a disruptive student; attention is drawn to community expectations and to the impact the student's behavior is having on his or her peers through standardized verbal cues that do not necessarily reflect the educator's perspective or values. Yet in Candid Communication, there is no standardized roadmap for redirecting negative behavior; there is only the requirement that we be *real* in our communication with the student. The candid practitioner does not present himself as a remote authority laying down the law of the land, but rather as an earnest and direct individual willing to confront harsh realities without condemnation. The practitioner puts aside concerns for what *ought* to be said and instead says what he believes to be the case based on his personal observations.

There are three distinct kinds of direct statements that a candid communicator can use: value-based, subjective, and objective or “mirror” statements. Each has its role and a context in which it is the preferred option, but the mirror statement seems to stand out above the others as

being most often conducive to the therapeutic goal of this approach. The first of these three, and the least often effective, is the value-based statement.

If Timmy has plugged a pencil-sharpener in next to him so that he can control who uses it, a value-based statement addressing this issue would sound something like, “Timmy, I don't want you using the pencil-sharpener to control your peers. The pencil-sharpener is for everyone to use.” This statement relies heavily on a value of educator, namely that people should not try to control others without good reason. This value is implicitly expressed and the statement is meant to be coercive, but the value may not be shared by the student and thus is not necessarily a motivating factor for the student to change his behavior. Indeed, the message behind this statement is, “Stop doing what you're doing because I don't like it.” This kind of statement can be effective when there is already a rapport established between the educator and student, where the student trusts and respects the educator and thus is likely to respond positively to value-based expectations. But if this kind of rapport does not exist, value-based statements should be avoided altogether.

The second kind of direct statement is the subjective, or personal observation, statement. This is preferable to the value-based statement because it relies upon what has been observed rather than on the personal preferences and values of the educator, and thus is more broadly effective. In this instance, the educator might say, “Timmy, you seem to have plugged the pencil-sharpener in next to you just so that you can control who uses it.” This observation may, and probably will, be denied by the student, but it shows that the educator is aware of the student's motivations and brings those motivations into public discourse. If Timmy is not using the pencil-sharpener to control his peers, the burden of showing that rests on him. Thus if the educator's statement is challenged, it opens up a dialogue about the issue of control as a matter of course,

providing an opportunity to address the behavior regardless of whether or not there is agreement about the cause of that behavior.

The third kind of direct statement is the objective, or mirror, statement. Here the educator provides the simplest kind of feedback possible, as only the circumstances of the event itself are presented to the student. The educator says, “Timmy, you plugged that pencil-sharpener in next you, where you can use it any time, but the last two times someone else has tried to use it you've made them wait and have sharpened your pencil before them.” No question or further statement needs to be made, as the student will almost always respond by attempting to justify their behavior. Yet the educator has not used the word “control” and has made no accusations; they have only held up a mirror for students to see themselves in. For this reason, this kind of statement is broadly effective, as it compels the student to examine their own behavior without any explicit reproach from an outside source. The student cannot blame his sudden discomfort on the accusations of either the educator or his peers, as he is confronted merely with the reality of his own actions.

Generally speaking, these three kinds of statements can be understood as progressively reflecting the development of the relationship between the parties involved. When very little rapport exists, the mirror statement is the most reliably effective at fostering self-reflection, as it does not draw upon the experience or values of the candid practitioner as a factor in the exchange. Because the student may not trust or care about the experience or values of his teacher early in their relationship, the candid element in the educator's style is better relegated to the most frugal of observations: you did A, B, and C, and then D happened. As the relationship develops and the student comes to expect that the candid practitioner is going to reliably state their observations without subterfuge or condemnation, an appreciation for the educator's

experience will often grow as a result (Howe, 2012). The student becomes confident that the educator can be relied upon to offer direct feedback, and that this feedback genuinely and consistently reflects the observations of the educator. This consistency compels the student to trust the experience of his teacher, for every time that the student receives feedback without simultaneously being told he is bad or flawed because of his actions, confidence in his relationship with his teacher grows.

Once a relationship with the student has been established, the candid communicator can more effectively employ subjective statements. The student now knows that he will consistently be offered genuine feedback and also has a sense of his teacher's disposition. This fosters trust in the educator's perspective, making the educator's experience a relevant and potent factor in future candid statements. And as the relationship continues to develop, the student will come to see that the educator's perspective is influenced by certain values and worldviews. While the student may not necessarily share these values, they will inevitably become relevant and potentially influential as the student's trust and respect for the educator grows. It is in this fortuitous circumstance that value-based observations become generally effective in redirecting negative behavior. Indeed, at this level the educator's very personality becomes an influential factor in his exchange with the student.

Past all normatively-based expectations, past any concerns for being a part of a community or fitting in with one's peer group, past any standardized system of what's "good" and what's "bad," the candid communicator offers a very basic but very profound alternative: an open and honest exchange between two people. The candid educator says, in effect, "Here we are. I see you. Now what?" (Howe, 2012) The raw experience of interacting with a totally open and honest person who is willing to follow any line of reasoning, to challenge any defense or any

rationalization, can be unbearable for emotionally vulnerable students. They are compelled by the very nature of the exchange to examine their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and what they see will seldom be pleasing to them. Thus the very quality that makes Candid Communication cathartic also makes it intensely uncomfortable for those who lack a stable sense of themselves. For that reason, it is often necessary to isolate a student in crisis, as they will seek to avoid the difficulty of a genuine interpersonal exchange with another person. The student will turn to any peer or staff member around them in an attempt to keep their ego safe from scrutiny, sometimes pulling otherwise well-behaved classmates into an anti-social and disruptive dynamic, one that draws attention away from the real issues (Howe, 2012). The behavior cannot be fully addressed, and the student cannot grow as a person, without the tribulation of genuine introspection. Yet if candid practitioners are able to get their student to face those issues directly, free from the distractions of an audience, understanding of the underlying reasons for their behavior will more readily arise.

### **Viewpoints from Practitioners**

The practitioners I interviewed agreed that Candid Communication is the approach of choice for addressing the needs of emotionally escalated students. This is because Candid Communication allows practitioners to move directly to the core, motivating factors behind antagonistic or disruptive behavior without getting mired in extraneous details (Geisel, 2012; Howe, 2012; Schaefer, 2012). In Jody's perspective, it allows one to lead the student back to their "point of integrity," that place where the student is more emotionally secure because their ego-needs are met (Howe, 2012). He asserts that all of us have a concept of ourselves that is stable and secure: a self with integrity. When students are acting out, he argues, they have lost that

sense of integrity; they are unconsciously searching for validation from their community or their environment in an attempt to re-assert an image of themselves that they feel comfortable with (Howe, 2012).

The practitioners also agreed that a strength of Candid Communication is that it improves the relationship a practitioner has with a student by cultivating trust. Through consistent genuine statements, the student learns that communication with a candid practitioner is going to be reliable; the practitioner will speak honestly and directly rather than deliver prepackaged imperatives (Geisel, 2012; Howe, 2012). This level of trust makes it far more likely that the student will begin to share their emotional world and thereby confront some of the issues behind their behavior (Geisel, 2012). Further, having a positive relationship with staff increases the incentive to engage in positive behavior, as students hold themselves to higher standards when in the presence of someone whose opinion they value (Geisel, 2012).

Another virtue of Candid Communication identified by Jody is that “it's hard to hide behind normal defense strategies and triangulations with social norms if you're having direct communication” (Howe, 2012). Because Candid Communication doesn't rely on external cues or expectations, and is not dependent upon community feedback or normative considerations, students cannot as easily avoid the conversation through triangulation—the deliberate entanglement of third parties to obfuscate or avoid issues of import. This avoidance strategy is extremely common, so it is a tremendous asset if the candid practitioner is able to identify those instances in which triangulation is being employed as a kind of intellectual subterfuge.

Lastly, Mike Schaefer made an interesting comparison between Buddhism and Candid Communication, reporting the quality of being fully present as being an asset in practicing this approach:

I think of mindfulness when I think of Candid Communication. I think of living in that moment. When a student is struggling, approaching them right where they are, [determining] what their needs are in that moment, is probably the most effective way to draw them out and be able to work with them (Schaefer, 2012).

He believes that mindfulness is a key component of Candid Communication because it is situationally-based: it considers the emotions of the student and the circumstances behind their escalated behavior. It entails “addressing things in the moment, and being aware of all the dynamics that the person who you're supporting is really needing support of” (Schaefer, 2012). Although the earlier comparison I made between the sudden insight of Zen Buddhism is different from the general quality of mindfulness, it is interesting to note that both of us independently drew comparisons between Buddhist thought and Candid Communication.

The practitioners were also aware of several challenges to Candid Communication. First among these is that the norms of the culture of a community may not be conducive to Candid Communication if that culture is “steeped in social norms and ego-defenses” (Howe, 2012). This could of course be true of a student population, but Jody was speaking specifically about staff cultures. In his experience, the staff of some schools were unwilling to examine and speak candidly about their own issues. These issues were, in Jody's opinion, contributing to the negative culture of the school, yet the staff were normatively opposed to the introspection and self-scrutiny required to candidly address those issues (Howe, 2012). They were resistant to the “parallel process,” the emotional and psychological development of staff that ideally takes place alongside the development of students. This is a significant obstacle to Candid Communication, for if the personal or emotional issues of an educator are compounding the issues of the student body, no significant progress can be made in that classroom without efforts at self-awareness on both sides.

Above, I cautioned that Candid Communication can devolve into cruelty. Observations



made in a direct and genuine manner can be painful for the student if there's not a proper consideration of their emotional needs in that moment. This danger was echoed by Jody, who thought there was a risk of Candid Communication becoming mean “when an inexperienced practitioner does not exercise emotional awareness” (Howe, 2012). He also saw danger in a practitioner that does not represent a consistent persona, a practitioner who fails to accurately represent who they are on a day to day basis:

If a kid can't be sure that my stance in this world, whether you agree with it or not, is going to be the same from day to day, then I can't really engage in Candid Communication because it just wouldn't be helpful. That would be a game of Catch Me If You Can; I'm going to change rules every day, you try to keep up. That is not the point (Howe, 2012).

Obviously a disposition of this kind would also impede the development of the positive relationship that Rick Geisel found so essential to Candid Communication.

Finally, Rick Geisel also pointed out that the openness of Candid Communication poses a danger. Because candid practitioners share so much of who they are as individuals with students, the question of how much to share becomes very significant. The example that Rick used in illustrating this point pertained to the issue substance abuse. If a candid practitioner is discussing substance abuse with a student, would it be appropriate for that practitioner to share some of his own experience with substances? Would such an exchange open the door to greater trust and a more honest relationship that student, or would it jeopardize the practitioner's position as a reliable adult with good judgment? Rick wasn't sure what limits candid practitioners should set for themselves, and even suggested that those limits might shift depending on which student is being spoken with, but he was concerned about the topic in a general sense (Geisel, 2012).

In summary, I have argued that the Candid Approach relies on three fundamental strategies: the maintenance of an abiding and comprehensive emotional awareness, intentional

suspension of norms that inhibit clarity, and direct statements of appraisal and observation.

Further, I asserted that the manner in which these statements are made is dependent upon the solidity of the relationship between the candid practitioner and the student; objective “mirror” statements are broadly effective, but subjective and value-based statements are more reliant on an established rapport. Lastly, this chapter revealed that there are dangers to the Candid

Approach: its effectiveness can be inhibited by cultural norms that preclude honest reflection, it can devolve into cruelty without emotional sensitivity on the part of the practitioner, and there is a danger that candid practitioners may divulge too much personal information in their attempts to “be human” with their students. With this understanding of the approach in place, we are now prepared to examine its relationship to the normative model.

**The Relationship Between Normative Culture and Candid Communication**

In this chapter, I will argue that extremely anti-social students often cannot be reached through the Normative Approach alone. I will assert that normative pressures can further alienate socially isolated students, and that such students can come to hold their negative position within a community as a point of pride. Finally, I will show that extremely anti-social students can be reached by candid practitioners as long as those practitioners are willing to explore and take seriously the potentially dark paths of their students' reasoning.

**The Limits of Normative Culture and the Role of Candid Communication**

I have shown that the Normative Approach utilizes the expectations of a community to influence the behavior of students. Students are often more concerned about the opinions of their peers than they are about the opinions of authority figures, and thus are more likely to maintain appropriate behavior when the pressure to do so is put on them by their community as a whole. Further, the Normative Approach relies upon the input of all students—even disruptive or anti-social students have a voice in determining the expectations of their community. This bolsters each student's perception that he is a potent and valued member of that community, which is likely to make him feel more invested in the school or program as a whole. Yet some students simply do not relate to their peer group in a way that would allow the Normative Approach to achieve a pro-social transformation of their behavior.

When students are socially or emotionally invested in the culture of their school, their actions are readily influenced by the expectations of their peer group. The disapproval of their peers is enough to motivate them to change their behavior if their behavior is revealed to be in

conflict with the spirit of the community. In such circumstances, the Normative Approach functions efficiently; educators can easily elicit peer power to influence the choices of a disruptive student. But if the student does not feel socially or emotionally invested in his community, or if his community's values and expectations differ greatly enough from his own, the student will become isolated from his peer group and their cues will subsequently lose their efficacy. In such a situation, a normatively-based approach will, at best, be useless, and at its worst, can further isolate the deviant student. In part, this is because peer-based support for such a student will be interpreted as antagonism, as the norms he is being asked to follow are not *his* norms. Rather than being influenced to move closer to the norms and expectations of the community through such cues, the student instead feels embattled and is driven away. Ultimately, he comes to feel completely at odds with his peer group, and is conspicuously separate from them in the educational community. Beyond simply facilitating further disruptive behavior in the classroom, this is an extremely dangerous situation for the psychological well-being of the student (Christenson, Eisenberg, Hall-Lande, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Parker & Asher, 1987; Trout, 1980).

It has been shown that social isolation can correspond with anti-social, deviant, and even lethally violent behavior (Lee, Maume, & Ousey, 2009). From the incident at Columbine High School in 1999 to the recent shooting committed by TJ Lane in Ohio, the last two decades are replete with examples of students who were described as “loners” by their peers suddenly committing seemingly random acts of violence. Often these students are described as “strange” or “awkward” and seem to have trouble relating to their peers. Whatever the cause for their initial isolation may be, the student who begins to see himself as estranged from his community is not far from feeling estranged from humanity in general. For if the student cannot connect with

those human beings closest to him, his immediate community, he will have little confidence in finding acceptance among people in general.

This is not to say, of course, that anyone who doesn't seem to fit in to their community is a murderer in the making. The introverted and private student who is merely uncomfortable in his peer group is very different from a student who has no regard for, or even antipathy for, the norms of his community. The truly socially isolated student will tend to intentionally swim against the normative stream of the classroom in order to bolster his sense of himself as a public enemy. This is because the student's very identity has become wrapped up in his status as a pariah. He knows he is the “freak” or the “bad” kid, and he seeks to reinforce that image by conspicuously disregarding the normative culture of his community.

One student at our school came from a family with a locally notorious surname, which for the purposes of this paper will be Smith. Every male role model in his life had been incarcerated, his mother and sisters had severe drug problems, and he had witnessed several violent encounters between his family and the police officers and social workers who had visited them. Although this student was only six years old, within his first two weeks in our program he had spit on three staff members (myself included), had used the most offensive language possible in our society, had physically assaulted another student who was nearly twice his age, and had exhibited immense delight in being reviled for engaging in shocking and repulsive behavior (such as attempting to smear his own feces on his peers). On one occasion, a staff member was admonishing this student to make better choices, telling him that his behavior was causing his peers to dislike him. In a striking exhibition of his sense of himself, the student proudly replied, “I don't care; I'm a Smith!”

Clearly this young Smith was not invested in the norms of his community; his criminally-

oriented family unit was the only social group he truly identified with. Every time he acted in opposition to the norms and expectations of his community, he was reinforcing his sense of himself as the “bad guy.” And given that this identity was the only one he had ever known, the reaction his reprehensible behavior elicited from his peers was actually a source of pride. He seemed to feel, in effect, that if he could not be good, he would be preeminently bad. Obviously, with a student of this disposition the Normative Approach is both logically and practically ineffectual, as no socially-based appeal will carry any weight with him. Such a student can only be inspired to change his behavior if he can be reached on a more fundamental, individualized level.

For those students who cannot be compelled to change their behavior through the Normative Approach, the Candid Approach can be used to establish a genuine and direct line of dialogue. Rather than rely on the expectations of others, the candid practitioner inquires into the core values of the student and the dynamics of their emotional life. For example, when the student says that he doesn't care that he has hurt one of his peers, the candid practitioner is there to challenge the veracity of that statement. And if the student insists that, no, really, he just doesn't care about other people, the candid practitioner is there to explore the practical consequences of that lack of concern in an objective way: “In a society in which people depend upon each other for their every material need,” the candid practitioner might say, “can you afford to not care about the well-being of those who make your life possible? Will your community allow you to be a part of it if you're so willing to hurt them with impunity?” Of course the student does not necessarily come away with a greater degree of compassion for his fellow man after such an exchange, but it will nonetheless get him thinking about whether or not it's prudent to exhibit his lack of care so conspicuously. And if, upon reflection, he determines that his

actions do not serve his own interests, he will likely be motivated to change his behavior.

At the core of the Candid Approach is a willingness to follow the student's reasoning no matter where it may lead, while simultaneously being ready and able to point out its inevitable subterfuge. The candid practitioner does not bother with imperatives; there is no sense in telling an anti-social student how he *ought* to behave. His behavior will only change when he himself wants to change it. Thus if we are to have any hope of inspiring that desire for change, we must, in effect, play the student's game. We must allow ourselves to contemplate the world as he sees it, for only then can *we* see, and subsequently point out, the flaws of that worldview. And, inevitably, there are flaws; humans cannot afford to be anti-social, as we are members of a profoundly social species. So long as the student is cognitively capable of it, a hostile or chaotic demeanor can be revealed to him as not being in his best interest.

The ultimate endeavor of the candid practitioner is to cultivate a stable *inner* authority for the student by challenging him to reconcile the reality of who he is with the reality of the world (Howe, 2012). In a pointed and forthright manner, the candid practitioner compels the student to explore who he is, what he values, and what he wants to achieve. When the student can see that his behavior runs counter to his desired goals, he himself will choose to change it. This is in contradistinction to the external authority which is so ubiquitously relied upon to alter human behavior in other systems, including the Normative Approach. Despite being unique in that it confers that authority upon the community as a whole instead of upon the educator exclusively, the Normative Approach still relies upon the pressure of an external motivator. Yet reliance upon external authority is intrinsically limited; the student who is compelled to behave appropriately merely due to an external authority is only likely to maintain that behavior while the authority is present. What happens when the educator's back is turned, or outside of school, or away from the

watchful eyes of the law? Only the student who has an authority *within himself* that admonishes him to behave appropriately will consistently maintain pro-social behavior.

The Candid Approach supplements the Normative Approach by addressing those instances in which a student exhibits disdain or disregard for the external authority of community expectations. In this capacity, the two approaches usually function harmoniously with each other. The Candid Approach can pick up where the Normative Approach leaves off by attempting to shift the locus of authority from external community pressure to internal self-regulation. However, conflict between these approaches can arise when Candid Communication violates the norms that have been established in a Normative Culture.

Given that the Normative Approach relies heavily upon cues that remind students of community norms, it can be problematic if a candid practitioner is willfully and publicly disregarding those norms in his pursuit of illumination. For example, a norm followed at the Buffalo Mountain School is that of “Appropriate Communication,” which entails speaking at an appropriate volume, among other things. When I screamed so that the student who struggled to moderate his own voice could see for himself that very loud voices are unpleasant, I was blatantly disregarding that norm. Subsequently, two staff members came to my classroom shortly thereafter to find out what was wrong—who was so emotionally escalated that they were screaming? Of course once they discovered that it was me and that I was not upset, their concern vanished, as they understood the methodology behind my extreme behavior. Nevertheless, the conspicuous violation of a norm elicited a rapid response from staff who sought to reinforce the norms of our community. In this particular circumstance, the norm that was disregarded was somewhat innocuous, but it is possible to imagine a more problematic conflict between the candid practitioner's pursuit of insight and the normative restrictions of the community.



Despite the occasional disharmony between these approaches, the two can function very effectively together. For example, the points process at the Buffalo Mountain School allows students to evaluate themselves and their peers in accordance with explicit normative categories of behavior. When a student claims that they have earned a three for Respectful Boundaries despite having shoved a peer earlier in the day, either the staff or their peers will be compelled to contradict them. This is an ideal time to practice Candid Communication, as the student may need to have his behavior pointed out to him through objective statements. Sometimes the student will become agitated by the candid feedback, but this tends to occur more often with students who are new to the community. Once newcomers get used to the forthright feedback of their peers and educators, they tend to offer more honest assessments of their day in order to preempt the candid input they know they will receive from their community if their self-assessment is disingenuous.

Another aspect of the Buffalo Mountain School program that calls for a combination of the Normative and Candid Approaches is the Fishbowl. Although it is infrequently used, the Fishbowl is designed to give students a public forum to express their feelings about the behavior of a specific student. The offending student sits in the middle of a room with his peers forming a circle around him. Staff members facilitate the process as students take turns expressing how the offending student's behavior has affected them. All of this is done within the context of a Normative Community: the offending student's peers have behavioral expectations and the offending student is not meeting them. Specific norms are brought up to identify exactly how the student has failed to meet those expectations. And because students are encouraged to share personal sentiments in a direct way, alongside staff members who are present to ensure that the process remains respectful and pro-social, the Fishbowl also presents a wonderful opportunity to

practice Candid Communication. All students in the community know that the student in the middle of the Fishbowl is supremely uncomfortable and in a vulnerable position, and this tends to foster gentler, more compassionate feedback. With or without staff intervention, students attempt to express their negative feelings in a positive way, and they do so while being able to plainly see the emotional condition of the offending student. This in turn allows them to cultivate the intuitive emotional sensitivity that lies at the heart of the Candid Approach, at the very same time that they attempt to reassert the norms of their community.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I have argued that the Normative Approach can provide a social safety net where some students feel they are valued by their community, but that many anti-social students struggle to accept feedback, positive or otherwise, from their peers and so do not feel emotionally safe in their peer group—even within a strong Normative Culture. This presents a challenge to the Normative Approach if it is practiced in isolation, but the needs of anti-social students can be addressed through Candid Communication. While it can occasionally lead to further emotional escalation, the belief of those practicing the Candid Approach is that these emotional outbursts are a byproduct of the therapeutic internal process that results from the student's personal quest for integrity.

By this understanding, the Candid Approach can be emotionally provocative regardless of whether or not a student feels emotionally safe within their community. Thus the potential for Normative Culture providing an emotional safety net is irrelevant, as the possibility of an emotional safety net is not essential to the therapeutic goal of the Candid Approach. Further, practitioners of Candid Communication observed that it was most effective in dealing with students who were already emotionally escalated because it allowed those practitioners to immediately address the issues behind that escalation. Emotional escalation is a typical byproduct of the therapeutic intentions of Candid Communication, and is therefore not to be considered a necessarily negative or adverse effect of the approach.

One area where Candid Communication appeared to fall short was in the area of social skill development. Candid Communication typically takes place between two people exclusively, and in fact can be inhibited by the presence of other students if triangulation is employed to

protect ego needs. Yet students who struggle to engage in positive social interactions will need to practice their social skills amongst their peer group. As intensive Candid Communication often only takes place after the student has been removed from their community, anti-social students may be limited by having their formative social interactions relegated to their exchange with a candid practitioner. In this aspect, Candid Communication is dependent upon the Normative Approach to provide diverse and substantive pro-social instruction in a community-based context.

With this summary of my argument in place, let us now revisit the original research questions.

At the start of my inquiry, I asked, “What role does students' sense of emotional safety play in determining the effectiveness of Candid Communication?” I have asserted that candid practitioners must be keenly aware of students' emotional states in order to maintain a therapeutic direction to the conversation, but also that emotional escalation is a normal result of this approach; extreme reactions are not necessarily indicative of a negative result. Thus an awareness of students' sense of emotional safety is a critical component of Candid Communication, but emotional provocation itself may be necessary in order to achieve a therapeutic outcome.

I also asked, “What role do normative pressures have in determining students' feelings of emotional safety?” For the average student, I have argued that a normative community does provide an emotional safety net; students know what to expect, and they know they will not be thrown away because of past behaviors. However, I also pointed out that extremely anti-social students often take pride in flaunting their disregard for the norms of their community, and in this respect normative pressures only encourage such students to intensify their negative behaviors.

Thus the impact normative pressures have on students' feelings of emotional safety vary in accordance with their level of social isolation and negative self-image.

The third question guiding my research was, “What factors must be present for the Normative and Candid approaches to be effective in their respective roles?” The effectiveness of the Normative Approach largely depends on the level of social integration of the student. Conversely, the effectiveness of the Candid Approach is almost exclusively dependent upon the skill of the practitioner.

Finally, my primary research question was, “How can the Normative and Candid approaches be effective in addressing disruptive or anti-social behavior in students at Buffalo Mountain School?” I have argued that a pro-social therapeutic outcome can be achieved by practicing Candid Communication within a positive Normative Culture. Students who struggle socially within a Normative Culture due to emotional disturbances can have those disturbances addressed through Candid Communication. Conversely, the community feedback of a Normative Culture can help many students cultivate their social skills, a virtue which is not afforded by Candid Communication practiced in isolation. A program that utilizes both approaches is thus well-equipped to address the needs of a diverse population of emotionally or behaviorally disturbed students.

In closing, I would like to bring the reader's attention back to the title of this paper. Although oppositional students can rapidly sour the joy of teaching for even the most patient of educators, we would do well to remember that the modern world is host to countless broken homes, fractured families, and damaged psyches. The insolent and aggressive teen that spits insults at us in the classroom is almost invariably holding the pain of an abused and neglected

child within his heart. If we reject such students outright, condemning their actions and sending them out of our classrooms, we eliminate any possibility of serving a student whose behavior screams, often literally, that they are in desperate need of assistance. Just as we are sometimes required to address unexpected knowledge gaps before we can continue with our lesson plans, so too is the behavior of oppositional students a call to action for educators who are willing to engage a tenebrous inner landscape. We may not be trained psychotherapists, but we are human nevertheless—and as such are experts of human suffering. Let us take full advantage of our expertise, and offer all that we can to our students.

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## **Appendices**

These interviews were recorded at the Buffalo Mountain School on three separate occasions throughout 2012. The dates for each are given below. The following transcriptions are nearly verbatim, and have been edited exclusively for the purpose of clarity.

**Appendix A: Interview with Jody Howe, Therapist, conducted January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

Q: Do you tend to use the normative approach or the candid approach more when redirecting anti-social behavior?

A: The Candid Approach. I think it gets back to the basis of human behavior, as we had been talking about the point of departure. I think it's the fastest, most humane way to get someone back to the point of integrity. Whether that be positive or negative, but their own integrity, and to that point where they are able to look at what they need and look at their choices and own their choices around what behavior they're going to engage in.

Q: What are the benefits of the normative approach?

A: It's an impersonal structured framework in which to work. Peer pressure lessens occurrences of student-adult power struggles. While it appears personal somewhat, it is really a safe container, so that it provides a kind of impersonal... it doesn't matter if Johnny is good or bad today, he gets to start over. It provides a safe container. Most of the kids who come in out of the "other world," before alternative school, encounter real strict, yes/no answers to their behaviors; yes, we'll tolerate it, no we won't. In this container, in the normative approach as I see it, it's a safe container because we will say, "It is not desirable, but we will not throw you in the garbage because of it. We will continue to talk with you about it." Why I say it's impersonal is because nobody holds onto history. If you struggle today and you have a negative behavior, then you get to process it. You get to do whatever you do tomorrow. So it's not personal. You have not failed, you have made choices. Tomorrow you get to make choices again.

Q: What are the challenges of the normative approach?

A: The challenge for me is that it's not truly a normative culture; it's an approach. The hat is hung on "normative culture," but it's not truly a normative culture. Its baseline is set by

authority figures and the students are very aware of that. So while the students get to play around the edges with some parts of their culture, there's many [parts] that they cannot [change]. The students cannot decide to all smoke cigarettes in school. The students can't decide to leave school in the middle of the day and go down the street and drink with their buddies. So it's not truly a normative culture. The peer pressure, the idea that the students sit around and help establish norms is true to a point, but those norms are pretty... I don't know the correct word. In my experience that's more about, "Can I wear my hat? Can I have caffeine?" That kind of thing. That's a challenge because it's a double standard. We have said you get help from your community, but only part of it. So it's kind of disingenuous, and kids know it.

Q: In what instances is the normative approach most effective?

A: When a peer culture is positively oriented. If the peer community has an investment in being positive, then it's fairly self-sustaining. They regulate each other, they put the pressure on each other. There does not need to be a lot of adult intervention – it's pretty self-sustaining.

Q: In what instances is the normative approach least effective?

A: It's least effective when the short-comings are glaringly apparent in the mix. So oppositional students pushing boundaries and encountering adult authority figures. Lack of parallel process also. In the first instance, a peer culture becomes negative and the norms become negative. It's very hard to stand there as a staff member and be an authority figure and tell them that they have a normative culture. Because it's no longer a normative culture, it's an authority-based culture. And it's not lost on them. And also the lack of parallel process with staff, that's very apparent too. It's a double standard. For instance, no cell phones - except staff - or talking over each other, or any of that. If we are truly a normative culture, that would include all of us. And if it truly included all of us, there would be no need for a separation between the staff as

authority figure and the student, but it doesn't work that way usually. It's a great idea. And when it works, when the majority of people are positively-oriented, it works pretty well. But there's no real room for negative. When the peer culture gets negatively-oriented, then the normative process really becomes a talking point. It regresses to, "What if it were positive?"

Q: What are the benefits of candid communication?

A: Lack of triangulation and defenses are minimized. Candid communication, in my idea of that process, is an objective statement of what's observed, mostly. To say "You smell like you just came from a barn." Defenses are minimized in that, although it's shocking the first couple of times, [because] what happens quickly in my experience is that the students begin to trust that you're going to say what you see or say what you think without getting into the politics of it. That allows them to minimize their defenses or at least befriend their defenses, and start to get a sense of humor about their traditional ways to defend themselves. It becomes a process rather than something they have to hold on to - a life or death issue, if that makes sense. It's hard to hide behind normal defense strategies and triangulations with social norms if you're having direct communication. It's hard for the kids to do that. I think it's hard for adults to do that, actually.

Candid Communication is, look, I'm a human being, you're a human being. This is what I see. If I'm not accurate, correct me. This is what I think, if that's not accurate in your experience, please correct me. So it's not hiding behind social norms, it's not hiding behind expectations, it's just two people having a conversation, and nobody is right, nobody is wrong. I think the benefit of that is that people feel seen, they feel heard, and they don't feel threatened by that observation. If it's candid and it has integrity and there are no games being played; if it's just an objective observation, if it's just a genuine thought process of the person engaging in the candid conversation, then there's no need to defend against it. Just because you walk in the room and I

say you smell like barn does not mean that I hate you. It means you smell like barn. Now you can get defensive about that and we can talk about why you're defensive about that. Or you can say, "Yeah I smell like barn, I just came from the barn."

Q: What are the challenges of candid communication?

A: It's difficult when it's attempted in a culture steeped in social norms and ego-defenses. So if I were to walk into [a public] school and if I were to say to a group of traditional educators, in, let's say an average middle school, "One of the problems that you have with [behaviorally-challenged] kids is that you have not learned how to leave your personal stuff at the door," I'm going to get run out on a rail. Because it's not socially acceptable for them to be challenged—to think about what parts of their own challenges and dysfunctions are influencing their classroom and how that's influencing the children. I've actually had traditional educators say to me in those circumstances, "That's not in my job description. I'm not a therapist."

Q: That sounds like resistance to the parallel process.

A: Exactly. [It's] the same thing with alternative schools. I would not say [Buffalo Mountain] particularly, but I have been in alternative schools where the model is so rigidly adhered to that there is no room for that. The model is an "if-then" situation, and there is no room for candid communication in an "if-then" situation because candid communication is more out of the box - here we are, what are you going to do?

As an aside here, I think it would be more effective... we have a student here who was very negative and spent a lot of time processing... A kid like that I've always thought we would be more effective to, one of us, take him out in the desert with just a gallon of water and a couple of protein bars and stay there for two days, maybe three. Just two people in the middle of the desert with no input other than here we are. One of the challenges would be a culture that's

steeped in some kind of social norm or demanding following the rules or something like that.

This particular student, it's very easy for him to triangulate all over the place. He can triangulate with staff's personal values, he can triangulate with some of these norms that we're supposed to be productive or respectful or safe or any number of things. He spins and spins and spins because there's no lack of opportunities for him to triangulate with something else outside of himself. My idea about taking a kid like that into the desert is, here I am, I see you kid, what are we going to do? A kid like him I would predict would run screaming around and around in circles probably just about out of sight for a few hours and then would end up in a heap and then would very tentatively engage in an interpersonal relationship because what else is there to do?

Q: In what instances is candid communication most effective?

A: When a student develops trust that communication will be genuine—whether it's good, bad, or indifferent, that it's going to be genuine. Whether they hear I like you, I don't like you, whatever, that it's genuine. I have never had a kid reject me because his values and my personal values are completely different. Never. I've had kids gets scared and not want to engage in the process because they feel like I have a crystal ball and I can see who they are, but never because we disagree in personal values. It's really about the genuineness; the integrity to be who you are, not about anything external.

I think it's most effective also when the students experience an existential dilemma in the form of direct communication. That's coming back to the point of departure. I, as a person, have integrity, and here is this world around me, and now I'm not getting treated right. Well the goal of candid communication, as I practice it, is to always bring that kid right back to the point of departure from integrity. Values and goals, all that extraneous stuff aside, the point is this kid has a sense of who they are, and they have a form of themselves that feels like it has integrity to

them, good, bad, or indifferent, and that's not where they are. They are in ego-defenses trying to find their way back there, and trying to find a situation or culture or something that identifies it and validates it. And that's great, but that has its own pitfalls. Ultimately, we're all on our own. Ultimately, if the kid is going to develop an internal authority rather than rely on an external authority, the point is to get back to that point to say, you're not broken, you're not bad. You have made a lot of choices that result in behaviors, but what do you want? Can you get real about it? Can you figure out how to get what you want in this big world where people have their expectations. Can you maintain the two? Can you be who you are inside and get along in this world that you might not agree with?

Q: In what instances is candid communication least effective?

A: When it's not supported by staff or the peer community [or] when an inexperienced practitioner does not exercise emotional awareness to balance it. Because without emotional awareness it can get pretty mean. That's really important. I can't, as a practitioner, engage in this if I'm not practicing integrity myself. If a kid can't be sure that my stance in this world, whether you agree with it or not, is going to be the same from day to day, then I can't really engage in candid communication because it just wouldn't be helpful. That would be a game of Catch Me If You Can; I'm going to change rules every day, you try to keep up. That is not the point. That is not about the kid.

Q: In your experience, are these approaches complementary or do they conflict with one another?

A: I think that they can be very complementary, but what that takes is a lot of cross-over and a lot of cross-over supervision. [For clarification, cross-over is the term Jody uses to describe the work that private therapists do for NFL.] The point of that supervision [is] not to second guess



normative culture but to make sure that the people on the frontline, staff, teachers and classroom counselors particularly, [understand] that they [need] to be really aware, emotionally aware, of the students reality. Which involves really becoming friends with your own stuff as a staff member, and being able to check it at the door when you come in. And, if you aren't able to do that, to be aware enough and friendly with yourself enough to just own it. The kids are not afraid of a staff member who is having a bad day and is a grump. They're not, and if you watch a staff member come in and say I had a horrible weekend and I'm not feeling that great about the world today, they will get a lot of room and a lot of leeway from the students. If they come in and say nothing and just start mouthing off to students they're going to get it back. Because there's no integrity in the second. There is integrity in the first. Hey, I'm human, it was a crap weekend, I'm not feeling all that happy about the world today—these kids will give you room. They will because it has integrity. They understand that. So I think it takes work. The work is therapeutic staff need to understand the idea of the normative approach, and the NFI staff need to understand this point of departure. And how who they are, as an authentic person or not, affects the student body. The point of departure [from integrity] is the need for ego-defenses.

**Appendix B: Interview with Rick Geisel, Regional Director, conducted February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012**

Q: Do you tend to use the normative approach or the candid approach more when redirecting anti-social behavior?

A: If I understand your definitions, I probably use a combination. I think the work we do with students in the NFI school day treatment milieu really requires that we develop relationships with our kids. The work is most importantly relational. The normative approach and the peer support is huge in developing a community where kids take responsibility for their behavior and the behavior of their peers. So I think I like and I appreciate it when staff use the candid communication approach as well.

Q: What are the benefits of the Normative Approach?

A: One of the things that we've talked about at countless meetings at Turning Points is the fact that the normative approach does not rely on visual cues or visual reminders of what's expected. By that I mean in many organizations and schools there's a huge list of what-not-to-dos. No chewing gum, no talking in class, no whatever-the-behavior-is. In the Normative Approach students perceive their peers to be acting in an appropriate manner and will react accordingly when things are working well. So you build on that positive behavior rather than isolating that negative behavior and drawing attention to it.

Q: What are the challenges of the Normative Approach?

A: The challenges of the Normative Approach are—and I'm seeing this happen more frequently now as we have students transitioning in and out at a greater rate, more and more kids coming in and thus more kids transitioning out—it's harder to build a healthy and supportive critical mass of positive normative culture students. It seems like what we're frequently doing is building a strong positive normative culture in classrooms that are changing. So the culture and

the mood of the program is cyclical sometimes, really. More positive, actually more frequently than not more chaotic, and that puts stress on staff, that puts stress on administrators, that puts stress on students. However, I don't want to paint a bleak picture, because even when we're in periods of chaos and dysfunction there are moments of great strength when the normative approach works in individual situations and we've all seen that happen, but it is a challenge to continue it.

Q: In what instances is the Normative Approach most effective?

A: I think positive feedback to individual students and their behaviors—I think it's huge. I've seen it at community meetings when students traditionally don't get recognized for growth and positive behavior, to be recognized by their peers—usually by first staff and then by peers joining in and acknowledging that, recognizing that, I think that's huge. I see self-esteem improving and I see kids starting—I see light bulbs going off where kids are saying, You know it's really kind of cooler to get recognized for positive behavior than to constantly be called out for negative. Because that's a self-fulfilling prophecy for some of our kids, that's how they navigate the world. And we all can understand why they do that. So we're really reprogramming and reframing for them constantly here.

Q: In what instances is the Normative Approach least effective?

A: When you have passive resistors. A passive resistor is—we have the term at Turning Points: your hands are clean but your fingernails are dirty. Meaning you're not—you couldn't be found guilty of negative support, however your underlying behavior is not positive and not supportive. And I think in the normative approach when you have a number of kids who are not buying into the program and are resistant it's difficult for the positive kids to not fall into that kind behavior. It's a testament to the staff we have and how the staff work really hard to let kids

recognize that and work towards improving the climate.

Q: What are the benefits of Candid Communication?

A: As I understand the definition that you're using, it's based on relationships, it's based on affirming behavior, affirming sometimes patterns, sometimes histories with kids—really being able to talk about things that typically wouldn't be talked about in the public school because it really wouldn't be relevant to the educational process, but because behavioral change and academic improvement is so inextricably linked here it's hard not to separate that. And I think that one of things that we do in the public school—and I hear this all the time as a school board member—is administrators and teachers will agree that we tell kids in the public school to stuff their emotions and get out their math because NECAPS tests are coming up and the school has got to do well. So I think there's a hesitancy to push too hard or delve too deeply into potentially traumatic experiences our kids are having in the public school because what do you do with that when you find it? I think the opposite is true in our programs because that's a way of moving kids towards developing strategies and approaches to dealing with those emotional-behavioral issues.

Q: What are the challenges of Candid Communication?

A: Many of the kids that come to our program, their way of dealing with the world is to manipulate the hell out of it, particularly adults. To say whatever, do whatever they need to do to survive. The challenge for a staff person in Candid Communication in that relational work is to acknowledge problematic areas, to be mindful of what kids are telling you in terms of whether or not it can be validated. I think sometimes student will divulge information about an allegation that occurred with a staff person or an allegation that occurred with a student that could be perceived as very troubling, that may not necessarily be true. But the relational work where we

invite kids to be telling us those things—we need to know what to do with that information. In Normative Culture, and staff meetings, and in the way staff are supposed to interact in a Normative Culture program, it's like a family. If the mother and father are communicating, that's a good thing. If the adults talk with one another and are clear about consequences and approaches, things run smoothly—or smoother. And I think that's challenge here.

Communication here is a huge thing that we struggle with in our programs.

Q: In what instances is Candid Communication most effective?

A: I think it's effective throughout the students' day in the program. One of the things that the public school is recognizing is that not every student develops a relationship with an adult in the school system. And there's been all kinds of research done about a positive relationship, whether its the principal of the school or one of the maintenance guys, but if a kid has somebody that they can talk to, that they feel comfortable with, it helps enormously in that student going through the year and being successful. It's the kids that don't have anybody or trust anybody. I've had a number of kids come into my office in my role as director and say, “I am so sick of people asking me how I feel.” Which I think is an interesting thing, particularly young boys who are not asked that a lot by adults. For them to have to reflect on connecting a behavior with an emotion is maybe the first time. If staff are legitimately concerned and it comes across in communication, it's huge.

Q: In what instances is Candid Communication least effective?

A: That would be someone who is new to doing this kind of work, who is maybe is not aware of self-imposed boundaries that we need to have in terms of who we are and who our students are. Is it right when you're having a conversation with a student about substance abuse to say, “Yeah, I've abused drugs before”? I don't know. Maybe with one student that is legitimate,

maybe with another student it's not. Recognizing how much of yourself you're going to put out there and how much you're going to ask the student to put out.

[NOTE: At this point, the recorder failed and the last question was lost. Based on the notes I took, I can report that Rick believed that the approaches were largely complementary.]

**Appendix C: Interview with Mike Schaefer, Program Director, conducted May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012**

Q: Do you tend to use the normative approach or the candid approach more when redirecting anti-social behavior?

A: I would say I use the candid approach. You're dealing with the situation as much as you're dealing with the student. I think each one is a new dynamic each time. That idea of wiping the slate clean is very much the way that I'd like to approach everybody. So if the situation warrants that I have to be more conscious of where they are emotionally at that time, then I would say that's me being more candid with them. The normative approach tends to use the whole community, and I think it's difficult to be a single voice as a whole community. That's not an approach I would ordinarily use. I may call in a community to view behaviors and discuss with it a student, especially on a re-entry [when a student must discuss their behaviors to re-join the community], but I personally would tend to use the candid approach more.

Q: What are the benefits of the Normative Approach?

A: In looking at the benefits of the Normative Approach, we're looking at long-term pro-social skills. We all belong to some community, even as we want to be individuals and pull ourselves out of whatever cliché groups we don't want to be a part of, that means we're part of the opposite groups. And so I see the benefit of the normative approach—teaching people how to be a part of a community. It's the real benefit of it.

Q: What are the challenges of the Normative Approach?

A: The biggest challenge to the Normative Approach is that if a student is not invested in his or her community, is not concerned with the perceptions of their community, is not concerned with their place in their community, then it's nullified; there's no effect; it's a useless process at that point.

Q: In what instances is the Normative Approach most effective?

A: I would use students who thrive on attention, either positive or negative. The Normative Approach can lend itself to having some usefulness with them. Students who aren't concerned and have a lot of anti-social behaviors would not be affected by the normative approach whatsoever.

Q: In what instances is the Normative Approach least effective?

A: Outside of anti-social students, I find that the Normative Approach is least effective when the community itself is not invested in a particular person. I've seen instances before where a student has ostracized his community so far, so much, that they are no longer willing to participate with that person. I think it works on both sides. The anti-social student is least affected by it, but a group that has become so jaded by an anti-social student will also become least affected by the normative approach; there are no norms anymore.

The health of a community is dictated by everybody being involved in a part of that community. If I were to look at this school specifically right now, we have one ultimately very healthy community in one of the classrooms. There's obviously some dynamics where there's behaviors that are risky and inappropriate, but the community itself is very healthy. The other two are not what I would consider healthy communities and are still working towards finding their health.

Q: What are the benefits of Candid Communication?

A: I think of mindfulness when I think of candid communication. I think of living in that moment. So when a student is struggling, approaching them right where they are, what their needs are in that moment, is probably the most effective way to draw them out and be able to work with them. Oftentimes I have found that there are students who aren't willing to talk in that



moment, and so the thing to do is not give them a negative consequence for their unwillingness to speak, but to give them more time. So I think the benefits of candid communication is addressing things in the moment, and being aware of all the dynamics that the person who you're supporting is really needing support of.

Q: What are the challenges of Candid Communication?

A: In looking at it in terms of candid communication versus normative approach, one of the challenges of candid communication is the fact that it doesn't use the community; it's not teaching them pro-social skills. Sometimes using candid communication with particular students who will only interact with certain adults—they're not learning some of those pro-social skills; they're not learning their place among their own community, in fact they then in turn only want to work with specific people, and that can be problematic.

The challenge is long-term. It doesn't address all the specific needs of a student. For instance, say we have a student who's having some struggles and the struggles are with some peers, you can address it in that moment what maybe that student could have done better, what they could have utilized as a strategy to get from point A to point B, but without including some of those students in that discussion, they're not getting the full scope of why it's important for them to be able to interact with other people.

Q: In what instances is Candid Communication most effective?

A: The higher the escalation, the higher the behavior that is considered anti-social, the riskier the behavior, those are the most effective situations when candid communication could be used. Mainly because I think, A, it shows a genuine concern for that specific person in that specific situation; B, it allows for that person to have a voice. A lot of people feel very stifled when having to speak in front of a community, or having to address their individual needs in

front of a community. So that's when I see that it could be most effective.

Q: In what instances is Candid Communication least effective?

A: When community feedback is necessary to move forward and work through whatever antisocial behavior would necessitate community feedback.

Q: In your experience, are the approaches complementary or do they conflict with one another?

A: Both, really. I think they complement one another, and I say that because in certain instances I have found myself using candid communication and then the community feedback is necessary. So I'll work through some of a situation individually and then draw the community in to give that community aspect, that normative aspect to what the behaviors are, from the whole community. But I can see how they can be at odds with one another in other situations. I don't think the community always needs to be implemented in dealing with specific situations. If I had to gamble, I would definitely use candid communication far more than I would the normative approach.

In one of the situations where I thought that they were in conflict with one another, I had an interaction with a student who was pretty escalated, using a lot of threatening language, a lot of vulgarity, directing it at myself, at my family members, at other staff, at other students; everyone was a target for his vulgar communication. I had tried setting expectations with him. I was noting how that's inappropriate communication, and how it's very threatening in his tone, in his speech, and I was getting nowhere; in fact, I was escalating him even further. I made a conscious decision to begin swearing back at him. Not directed at him, but as if that was the new norm in where we were talking. Everything that he said I responded by throwing in vulgarity as adjectives. He literally stopped, laughed, and asked me why I was swearing. I responded because

that's how we communicate now. Everyone has to swear to communicate, because that's how we're getting our point across. He responded and became the voice of reason. He said no, we don't, we don't have to swear for everything. It changed the entire way he looked at the situation. But to me, I looked at that as a conflict of the two approaches because I started out believing I was using this normative approach, to how society views vulgarity, and then I became fairly candid in swearing right back at him, and it had kind of established a new norm, at which point he reverted back and was using exactly my language from before about the first expectation: that we don't, as a society, swear at one another.